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SUBJECT: TONY BLAIR AND OTHERS SPEAK ON FAITH TO HUGE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC AUDIENCE IN ITALY

¶1. (U) More than one hundred thousand Catholics attended the thirtieth annual meeting of the "Communion and Liberation" (CL) Catholic lay movement from August 23-28 in Rimini (northern Italy), and heard messages from a wide range of international figures. Indeed, according to organizers, the combined audience for the more than 200 conferences, seminars, book presentations, exhibits, performances and sports events during the event exceeded 700,000 (those participating in more than one event were counted more than once) -- up 7 per cent from previous years. The Milan-based CL movement, a Vatican-affiliated association, has hundreds of thousands of sympathizers in Italy, Brazil, Spain, the United States and other countries. Italy's ministers of finance and education, the governor of the Italian Central Bank, former UN Special Envoy to Iraq Staffan De Mistura, Nobel laureate John Mather, and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush were among the speakers.

¶2. (U) Tony Blair was the biggest star at the weeklong event. In remarks delivered on August 27, Blair promoted a fair balance between the public, private and non-profit sectors and praised the role of faith in contributing to development and personal freedom. The Tony Blair foundation promotes interfaith dialogue and understanding about how faith can be a powerful force for good in the modern world, he said. (The text of Blair's speech is available at www.TonyBlairFaithFoundation.org). (Note: Blair was enthusiastically received by a crowd that strongly disagreed with the position he held on abortion as Prime Minister, but that welcomed his recent conversion to Catholicism. The audience was therefore very excited about his decision to attend the movement's flagship event.)

¶3. (SBU) Comment: While critics sometimes dismiss the CL event as a feel-good talkfest of center-right Italians and their ideological allies, the success of the event in attracting a wide spectrum of VIPs, intellectuals and hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world. The participation and enthusiasm of the crowds demonstrated the broader appeal of the movement and its message of personal activism to improve life in individual communities. CL enjoys the sympathy of Pope Benedict XVI, whose writing style and favorite themes are reminiscent of the literature and spirituality that CL promotes. In Italy, CL leaders are close to the ruling conservative party but elsewhere the movement is not overtly political. It is, however, at the forefront of the cultural wars pitting traditional Church values against Western European secularism. As such, it works assiduously to advance Church teachings on controversial issues such as euthanasia, abstinence in the fight against AIDS, abortion, and the role and influence of religion in society. End comment.

NOYES